



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2020

A noble patronage: Heinrich Wölfflin on the relation of art history and literature

von Orelli-Messerli, Barbara

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-183958>

Book Section

Published Version

Originally published at:

von Orelli-Messerli, Barbara (2020). A noble patronage: Heinrich Wölfflin on the relation of art history and literature. In: von Orelli-Messerli, Barbara. Ein Dialog der Künste : Neuinterpretation von Architektur und die Beschreibung in der Literatur der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart. Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 12-17.

A NOBLE PATRONAGE: HEINRICH WÖLFFLIN ON THE RELATION OF ART HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Barbara von Orelli-Messerli

Introduction

The past conferences on the theme of *A Dialogue of the Arts* have shown us that literary descriptions of different periods and languages witness the time in which they were written: they are on the one hand an important contribution for understanding the development of methods in art history and on the other hand they can disclose new interdisciplinary dialogues. Furthermore, the previous presentations and publications of these conferences have shown clearly that literary texts of different genres like prose, poetry, travelogues, diaries as well as letters and other categories open not only new art historical perceptions but also can give hints to new methods in the discipline. This means not only a breaking up of conventional art historical periodizations, but also architectural and spatial categories.

However, the conference devoted to *Reinterpreting Architectural Structure and its Description in Literature* is emphasizing once more the importance of the relationship of architecture and literature in different languages from Early Modern Times to the present. Architectural treatises and architects themselves rarely or never consider a reinterpretation of buildings, giving them strict functions. But there are observers, inhabitants and even visitors who can perceive changes or new functions of a building never conceived by its architect. Fixed in literary texts, the new purposes can be described as well as analyzed and in this way contribute to new methods and methodology for art history. It was the goal of the conference to test how far these new proceedings can influence traditional methodology and promote new methods for art history.

Heinrich Wölfflin on the interaction of architecture and literature

At this point, I would like to raise a question: Is there a higher authority that underpins the linking art history and literature? Are we just a remote field of art history or do we have a noble ancestry, not always in the foreground of the scientific society but nevertheless solidly anchored in the discipline? The answer is yes: there is a higher authority, we have a noble ancestry to make such connections and have even a name: Heinrich Wölfflin.

Quite often forgotten, it was Walther Rehm who highlighted the connection between literature and art history and the influence, which had the first on the latter. In the autumn of 1926, the well-known newspaper *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* planned a special edition for the 100th anniversary of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität. Asking Heinrich Wölfflin, whether he could recall a special time as a student in Munich, he had said:

I still see before me the two philosophers, examiners of the main branch [of the doctoral examination]: Prantl [...] and Hertling, the later chancellor of the republic (the only professor who never made a joke during his lectures), [...] Moritz Carrière, who examined art history [the secondary branch] and finally Michael Bernays, the scholarly and fine-minded literature historian [...].¹

Indeed, the young Wölfflin inherited a passion for eighteenth-century German classical literature from Michael Bernays.

Walther Rehm tells us that Wölfflin, at the beginning of his career, „had no clear idea in which direction the compass of his scientific interests and inclination would point to.“² Nevertheless, we can state that his doctoral thesis was an art historical one, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* in 1886, as well as his habilitation, two years later in 1888 *Renaissance und Barock. Eine Untersuchung über Wesen*



Fig. 1
Ludovico Tuminello:
Portrait of Heinrich
Wölfflin at the age of
22, 1886

und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien. He had written his parents on December 18th, 1886, giving an example of the science of history interpreted in a sense of a psychological history of development.³ He adds: „With the art of the Baroque I will give the first example.“ It is in *Renaissance und Barock* that Wölfflin can point to the fact that Baroque literature and art are nourished by the same spirit and can generate similar forms, be it in literature or in architecture. Wölfflin notes:

*We marvel as if at a miracle that Michelangelo could force his moods into sculpture and painting; perhaps it is more miraculous that he could do so with architecture. His buildings display his most distinctive personality everywhere, as those of no other artist do. The personal mood has a forcefulness and clarity hitherto unknown in architecture and never to be achieved again.*⁴

Giving more characteristics of Michelangelo's style, Wölfflin writes:

*The art of Michelangelo never embodies the happiness of human existence, and for this reason alone it transcends the art of the Renaissance. The atmosphere of the post-Renaissance period is fundamentally solemn. This solemnity was brought to bear in all spheres of life: religious conscience, a renewed distinction between the worldly and the ecclesiastical, the ceasing of the uninhibited enjoyment of life. Tasso chose for his Christian epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, a hero who is weary of the world. In social intercourse the general tone became formal and solemn; the light and easy grace of the Renaissance gave way to seriousness and dignity, the gay playfulness to pompous, rustling splendor. Grandeur and importance became the only standards.*⁵

And then Wölfflin gives the concrete example. It is interesting to observe how the new style also took hold of poetry. The difference of language between Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1584) reveals the change of mood. How simple, how cheerful and lively are the first lines of Orlando:

*Le donne, i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori,
Le cortesie, l'audaci imprese io canto,
Che furo al tempo, che passaro i Mori*

D’Africa il mare, e in Francia nocquer tanto; [...].
How very different [are] Tasso’s opening lines:

Canto l’armi pietose, e il Capitano
Che il gran sepolcro liberò di Cristo:
Molto egli oprò col senno e con la mano;
Molto soffrì nel glorioso acquisto:
E invan l’inferno a lui s’oppose, e invano
S’armò d’Asia e di Libia il popol misto;
Che il Ciel gli diè favore [...].”⁶

Heinrich Wölfflin gives his comment on these two passages:

Note everywhere the lofty adjectives, the resounding line-endings, the measured repetitions (molto – , molto –, e invan –, e invano –); the weighty sentence construction, and the slower general rhythm. But the grandeur is not only in the expression; the verbal images also become larger. How significant, for instance, is Tasso’s transformation of the Muses. He lifts them into a vague heavenly zone and crowns them, not with a laurel wreath, but with ‘a golden crown of everlasting stars’. The adjective ‘gran’ is liberally used, and visions of grandeur must be conjured up everywhere.⁷

Wölfflin comes to his conclusion by saying:

We might conclude in general terms that in the Renaissance every detail was given loving attention for its own sake, that it was impossible to lavish too much care on invention in variety or on the execution of the particular. Now, however, we step further back and survey the general effect; we do not require grandeur in the individual parts, but only a general impression; there is less perception and more atmosphere.⁸

And as far as methods in art history are concerned, Wölfflin stated:

We have now evidently reached a point beyond that to which an analysis of the baroque conception of the human body would have brought us. In fact an important characteristic of

*the baroque style is that it cannot be seen in terms of the human body. The baroque has no sense of the significance of individual forms, only for the more muted effect of the hole.*⁹

We find these close connections between art and literature also in a letter written from Paris to Jacob Burckhardt on January 15th, 1889, in which Wölfflin writes:

*Paris is imprisoning my heart and my coat [head?] in a way that I put back in my suitcase [my work on] Salomon Gessner, a study that I really like and which is only lacking the last adjustments. Instead, I got involved with Poussin. It is quite strange how he expresses the spirit of the French classicism being far away from Paris, and if the French are putting him always together with Corneille, this is not a sort of play. With the siècle Louis XIV begins the decay of the truly great. This theme [for my research] has the advantage, that the historian gets the main notions by some theoretical annotations by Poussin: la noblesse, l'admiration etc., notions, which can be found exactly at the same place in Corneille and Descartes, whereas the main notion of the Renaissance (Ronsard etc.): l'imagination, is eliminated here everywhere.*¹⁰

At this point, we cannot follow Wölfflin when he is writing that these "notions [...] can be found at exactly the same place." What counts for us is the juxtaposition of Poussin, Corneille and Descartes and the observation of a similar phenomenon in painting and in literature.

We could go further, analyzing Wölfflin's publication on Salomon Gessner, with unpublished letters as he adds in the title, a publication on the writings of this Swiss classicist writer and artist, published in 1889, but also his contribution of 1893 to the publication in honor of Michael Bernays on Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773–1798), *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*.¹¹

I would like to end my juxtaposition of art and literature by Wölfflin here. However, what is important for us and for the symposium is to state that literature and art constitute a topic in the scientific research of Heinrich Wölfflin, especially at the beginning of his career. Furthermore, it is relevant for us that the art historian clearly pointed out the mutual illumination between literature and architecture, reinforcing thus the analyses of art history on different levels.

Notes

- ¹ Walther REHM: Heinrich Wölfflin als Literaturhistoriker. Mit einem Anhang ungedruckter Briefe von Michael Bernays, Eduard und Heinrich Wölfflin. Vorgelegt von Herrn Hans Sedlmayr am 8. Juli 1960, Diss. München 1960, p. 6.
- ² REHM: Heinrich Wölfflin (see note 1), p. 10.
- ³ Letter from Heinrich Wölfflin to his parents, 18th December 1886, in: REHM: Heinrich Wölfflin (see note 1), pp. 14–15.
- ⁴ Heinrich WÖLFFLIN: Renaissance und Barock. Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien. Diss. München 1888, p. 69; IDEM: Renaissance and Baroque. Translated by Kathrin Simon. With an Introduction by Peter Murray, London 1984 (second edition), p. 83.
- ⁵ WÖLFFLIN: Renaissance and Baroque (see note 4), p. 83–84.
- ⁶ ARIOSTO: Orlando Furioso:
Of dames, of knights, of armes, of loves delight,
Of curtesies, of high attempts I speake,
Then when the Moores transported all their might
On Africk seas the force of France to breake; (Trans. by John Harrington)
 Torquato TASSO: La Gerusalemme Liberata, 1584, Canto I, 9:
Arms, and the Chief I sing, whose pious hands
Redeem'd the tomb of Christ from impious bands;
Who much in council, much in field sustain'd,
Till just success his glorious labours gain'd; (Trans. by John Hoole, London 1763) quoted after: WÖLFFLIN: Renaissance and Baroque (see note 4), pp. 84, 168.
- ⁷ WÖLFFLIN: Renaissance and Baroque (see note 4), p. 84.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 85.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Letter of Heinrich Wölfflin from Paris to Jacob Burckhardt, dated 15th January 1889, in: REHM: Heinrich Wölfflin (see note 1), p. 20–21.
- ¹¹ Heinrich WÖLFFLIN: Die Herzenergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders. Kleine Schriften (1886–1933), hrsg. von Joseph Gantner, Basel 1946; see also: REHM: Heinrich Wölfflin (see note 1), p. 49.

Picture credits

1: University Library Basel, NL 95 : VI A 10b